Facing death together

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Chapter 1
General Introduction

"Millions long for immortality who do not know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon."

Susan Ertz

In less than 100 years from now, everybody who has just read this paragraph will be dead and gone, including the author of this dissertation. The fact that some people think that this first sentence is rather depressing shows that humans prefer not to be reminded of their mortality. For some, escaping from their earthly life might be a relief, but the majority of people have a strong desire to prolong their life on earth as long as possible. Even religious individuals, who strongly believe that there is an afterlife typically, want to extend their current life rather than make an early transition. The aversion for death is so strong that most people get the shivers when passing by, or walking through a cemetery. Why is it that individuals react so strongly to death cues, and how does this impact them psychologically? These are the questions that formed the building blocks for the central themes of this dissertation.

Through evolution, all species have developed an innate drive to stay alive and mechanisms to protect themselves from an early death. Human beings, however, have something unique that sets them apart from the other members of the animal kingdom. They are the only ones who are aware that they will one day die. The combination of the innate drive to stay alive and the knowledge that we, humans, are mortal has the potential to create an overwhelming fear of death. In order to cope with this, humans have developed a wide range of defensive mechanisms that help them to buffer this fear. These mechanisms make sure that people are not overwhelmed by fear when they are reminded of their mortality.

One of the most prominent and widely researched theories in Social Psychology, Terror Management Theory (TMT, Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991), is one that deals with the consequences of mortality reminders on people's emotions, cognitions, and actions. According to TMT, reminders of being a mortal creature trigger a set of defensive mechanisms that buffer the anxiety that is caused by this existential threat (see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997). These defensive reactions can be proximal, that is denying that there is a threat, or distal, achieving symbolic immortality. Thus, on the one hand people can this simply ignore or rationalize mortality reminders (proximal defense). For example, "I'm still young, death is irrelevant at this point." The other option is to cope with mortality threats by placing yourself in a context that is larger than life (distal defense), this is referred to as achieving "symbolic immortality", for example, "I'm part of a culture that will continue to exist, even when I'm dead and gone"

Following the reasoning of great minds such as Becker (1973) and Kierkegaard (1959), TMT argues that the need to achieve symbolic immortality exists in order to buffer one's mortality concerns. Identifying, and being part of something that last longer than ones lifetime, culture for example, helps people to cope with the prospect of death. Given this insight it is not all too surprising that the heroic deeds of Hollywood figures such as Superman, Rambo and 24's Jack Bauer, and in particular their inability to die, appeal to a wide audience. Two widely investigated distal defense mechanisms from the core of this dissertation, (a) maintaining a stable cultural worldview and (b) self-esteem maintenance. Cultural worldviews may shield people from experiencing mortality-related anxiety by offering a meaningful and transcendent concept of reality. Affirming one's worldview gives people the feeling that they are part of something that will exist beyond their lives, that life has meaning. Self-esteem may, in itself, also act as a buffer for the potential existential anxiety, since people with high self-esteem feel that they living up to the norms and standards of their culture and groups

they belong to. Both cultural worldview and self-esteem play a central role in recent descriptions and explanations of how people typically respond to mortality threats (for an overview, see Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004).

To comprehend or to enhance?

In this dissertation I will mainly focus on the terror managing function of groups, and in particular, how groups aid in affirming one's cultural worldview and maintaining self-esteem. Thereby I will try to answer the question why groups help people to cope with mortality threats. Two recurring motives in my dissertation are the need to comprehend or understand one's social environment (or cultural worldview), and the need to enhance one's self-esteem. All of the hypotheses I will test and findings I will discuss in the remaining empirical chapters are related to these motives. The comprehension and enhancement motives can be inferred from the two central mechanisms that drive responses to mortality salience according to TMT and are perhaps best seen as functional re-descriptions of these mechanisms, worldview affirmation (= comprehension) and self-esteem defense (=enhancement). Individuals who have the need to comprehend may use their worldview to do so. Individuals who have the need to enhance may boost their self-esteem to do so. While both needs are interrelated, and often intertwined, I will show that it is possible to separate the two, which gives a unique insight into the underlying motives of responses to mortality threat.

Mortality Salience and Groups

One of the basic elements why people typically prefer to be in groups over being alone in times of terror and threat is because these groups have the potential to provide protection against all kinds of dangers (Buss, 1995). Throughout history, groups have proven to increase the survival rate of human

beings. However, not only do groups protect their members against immediate threats such as predators, they also offer psychological support. In the present day and age, people continue to prefer to be close to others when threatened, even when there is no apparent physical threat (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969). Groups thus provide mental comfort. TMT research has shown that groups indeed aid in buffering mortality threat. For example, Renkema and Stapel (2009) found that participants overestimated the number of friends and family in the address book of their mobile phone when they were asked to think about their own death. The same participants also indicated that these mobile phone friends were more important to them than other people. An explanation that is often given for these and similar findings is that groups play a role in affirming people's *cultural worldview* and in maintaining *self-esteem*. Groups may help people define and affirm their cultural worldview and they may help in boosting self-esteem. Thus, when confronted with their own mortality people often seek affirmation of their worldviews in others who think alike. And conversely, mortality salience increases the extent to which people distance themselves from groups and individuals who think differently. As a result of these preferences, a number of TMT studies that have found that, when mortality is salient, people evaluate their own group more positively and outgroups more negatively (see for example, Greenberg et al., 1990; Florian & Mikulincer, 1997).

The notion that people's self-esteem may be boosted by group membership, and especially so when one's mortality is salient, may be illustrated by research by Dechesne and colleagues who found that people prefer to identify with groups that are able to positively affect their self esteem compared to groups who do not (Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, & Schimel, 2000). For example, regardless whether someone cares about soccer, he or she will be more prone to associate with the Dutch nationality after the Dutch soccer team wins the European championship compared to when they lose in the first round. Thus, people want to belong to groups that make them feel good and this need is

especially strong when people are reminded of their mortality. In the remaining chapters I will examine the basic characteristics of groups that determine the impact as well as the terror managing potential of groups.

Overview Empirical Chapters

Chapter 2

The general hypothesis put forward in chapter 2 of this dissertation is that, when individuals are reminded of their mortality, they are more likely to go with the flow, and base their own views on the opinions of others. To date, the majority of TMT studies have focused on the opposite, that is on how people prefer and seek out others who affirm their beliefs. However, I argue that altering one's beliefs to fit those of the group may also have a terror managing function.

In general, research has shown that people may have two main reasons to conform to the beliefs and opinions of other. On the one hand they do so because groups can often provide them with accurate and vital information that help people to comprehend their environment generate a stable cultural worldview (Castelli, Vanzetto, Sherman, & Arcuri, 2001; Quinn & Schlenker, 2002). Secondly, groups may fulfill the need for social approval (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cialdini, 1999; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) and affiliation (Florian, Mikulincer & Hirschberger, 2002; Mikulincer Florian & Hirschberger, 2002; Wisman & Koole, 2003), and thus aid in self-esteem striving. Both the need to comprehend and the need to self-enhance are thus likely to be activated when mortality is salient. Conforming to the beliefs of others may therefore act as a defensive mechanism in the face of existential threat, because it aids in interpreting and structuring the social environment, and enhancing a feeling of self-worth (see e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

Chapter 3

The aim of third chapter was to apply the findings of the previous chapter, where I showed that people have an especially strong tendency to conform their opinions to the opinions of groups when their mortality is salient, to the political domain. Specifically, I examine the effects of threatening situations - and mortality salience in general - on political preferences. I propose that mortality salience leads to greater support for and affiliation with bigger rather than small political parties. When mortality is salient, the tendency increases to lean towards majority rather than minority opinions.

In times of terror, people have a high need to conform to the norms and standards prescribed by culture (Solomon et al., 1991). Conforming to these norms provides people with a stable and coherent worldview, which leads to an increase of self-worth. In general, mainstream views, as often put forward by larger political parties, are more likely to fulfill these needs than perspectives that are only supported by a few. I therefore argue that, following mortality salience, people do not only like bigger political parties better than smaller ones, they will also be more likely to vote for these parties and support proposals these parties make. It is important to note that it is not just affiliation with a group *per se* that helps people to buffers mortality threat, but affiliation with the mainstream, and bigger groups. The studies presented in Chapter 3 aid in understanding and explaining voting behavior and political preferences in times of terror and threat. In addition, this chapter stresses the importance of group size, and shows that, in threatening times, people often turn to larger groups that often aid in validating the cultural worldview.

Chapter 4

One of the implications in Chapters 2 and 3 is that when mortality is salient people are drawn more towards groups and abandon their own, independent opinions than when mortality is not salient. This tendency to “go

with the mainstream" may be explained by the fact that groups, especially large groups, aid in the need comprehend. Large groups help to further one's understanding of one's social environment and to establish a stable cultural worldview ("If most people think this, it must be right."). On the other hand, groups are also a source for social support, thereby they are capable of maintaining ones self-esteem ("I feel better in groups that are large and do well.). Thus, both the need to make sense of one's environment and the need to enhance or maintain one's self-esteem drive people towards groups when mortality is salient. Chapter 4 aims to extend the insights gained in the former chapters by suggesting that – when people are confronted with their own mortality - figures that resemble large and cohesive groups, even when these figures are "meaningless" and abstract, will make them feel safer. Thus, I propose that the preference for both large and cohesive groups is relatively basic, that it will even show up in the perceived safety of abstract configurations of groups of geometric figures. This is an indication that these abstract representations (instead of real life-groups) may help to buffer the potential fear that may otherwise arise in threatening and uncertain situations.

Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, I investigate to what extent the need to comprehend and the need to enhance are the key motivational processes underlying the effects of mortality salience on stereotyping. Stereotyping has often been used as a dependent measure in TMT research. Interestingly, stereotyping is an excellent tool to investigate when mortality salience instigates primarily a comprehension or an enhancement motive. That is, by looking at the valence of the stereotypes people use (merely negative or both positive and negative), one can infer whether stereotyping is primarily enhancement- or comprehension-driven. The main goal of this chapter is thus to find out why mortality salience increases stereotyping. In both the stereotyping and TMT literature, it is often argued that stereotyping

typically serves one of two goals, (a) a comprehension goal or (b) an enhancement goal. A comprehension goal results in positive and negative stereotyping, which may facilitate the interpretation of ambiguous information and thus make the social world more comprehensible and more predictable. An enhancement goal, on the other hand, leads exclusively to negative stereotyping because self-esteem is boosted by negative but not by positive stereotyping (of outgroups). Following this reasoning, I hypothesized that, *in general,* mortality salience will activate a comprehension goal, resulting in positive as well as negative stereotyping. Nonetheless, there are settings in which a comprehension goal may be overridden by an enhancement goal. Specifically, I hypothesized that, in situations where intergroup competition or conflict is salient, mortality salience would activate an enhancement goal, more than a comprehension goal. Accordingly, people would use mainly negative stereotypes in these situations.

The goal of this dissertation

With the present dissertation I aim to add new insights to the TMT literature by showing that groups play a vital role in coping with mortality threats. By identifying key variables and by exploring the underlying mechanisms that drive people's cognitions and behaviors following mortality threats, the current dissertation may be a valuable contribution to the extant TMT literature. I argue that being reminded of the temporary nature of life motivates people to comprehend their environment or enhance their self-esteem. Groups can often aid in fulfilling both goals, but in chapter 5 we show that under some circumstances one can be preferred over the other. That is, enhancement goals are likely to be more active in situations where intergroup competition or conflict is salient. If this is not the case, then a comprehension goal will predominate. An overview and summary of the most important findings, and how these aid to the development and understanding of TMT, will be discussed in Chapter 6.